

3/29/22 Tuesday

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Disney Pledges to Help Repeal 'Don't Say Gay' Law After Florida's DeSantis Signs Measure

Despite widespread outrage, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis on Monday signed into law a bill that bans classroom instruction about the diversity of sexualities and genders that he says will protect children from "sexual instruction."

On Monday, DeSantis signed into law the "Parental Rights in Education" bill, better known as House Bill 1557 or simply the "Don't Say Gay" bill.

When the law takes effect in July, it will ban education about LGBTQ identities for children between kindergarten and third grade, and advise "age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate" lessons for older children that conform to state academic standards. The law will allow parents to sue schools or teachers who engage with those topics.

"We will continue to recognize that in the state of Florida, parents have a fundamental role in the education, health care and well-being of their children. We will not move from that," [DeSantis said](#) at the bill's signing.

The bill has been [furiously protested](#) since it was introduced in January, with US President Joe [Biden speaking out](#) about it as well as LGBTQ advocacy groups and [corporate media giant Disney](#), which operates the huge EPCOT Center theme park in Florida and is a major donor to local politicians.

After DeSantis signed the bill on Monday, [Disney issued a statement](#) saying it "should never have been signed into law" and promising to support its repeal.

"Our goal as a company is for this law to be repealed by the legislature or struck down in the courts, and we remain committed to supporting the national and state organizations working to achieve that. We are dedicated to standing up for the rights and safety of LGBTQ+ members of the Disney family, as well as the LGBTQ+ community in Florida and across the country," the statement added.

Equality Florida, the state's leading LGBTQ advocacy group, also [said earlier this month](#) that it intends to challenge the law in court.

Opponents of the bill have called attention to the [detrimental mental health effects](#) on LGBTQ youth who feel unsupported, including a vastly higher rate of attempted suicide as compared to non-LGBTQ youth.

"One way schools can support LGBTQ youth is by including positive content about LGBTQ people and issues in classroom curriculums," said the Trevor Project, the world's largest suicide prevention and crisis intervention organization for LGBTQ youth, in a [study summary published](#) in August 2021.

"Representation in school curriculums can affirm LGBTQ youth's sexual and gender identities. In addition to creating affirming environments, schools can also prevent suicide by providing all staff and students with comprehensive suicide prevention training," the group added.

However, for DeSantis and his supporters, the concern seems to be that children will learn to be more accepting of transgender peers - or come out as trans themselves after learning about them in school.

"[H]ow many parents want their kids to have transgenderism or something injected into classroom instruction?" [DeSantis said at a March 4](#) press conference. "It's basically saying for our younger students, do you really want them being taught about sex? And this is any sexual stuff. But I think clearly right now, we see a focus on transgenderism, telling kids they may be able to pick genders and all of that."

His spokesperson, Christina Pushaw, went even further, calling it [an "anti-grooming bill"](#) and claiming that anyone who opposed the bill was "probably a groomer," a term that refers to how pedophiles lure children into trusting them so they can exploit them sexually.

That posturing evokes the 1970s ["Save Our Children" campaign](#) spearheaded by pop singer Anita Bryant. The movement, which started in Florida's Dade County before spreading to several other states, aimed to revoke laws protecting LGBTQ people from discrimination. The movement's momentum was finally blunted after gay San Francisco City Councilor Harvey Milk [organized an effective effort](#) to convince Californians to vote down a referendum banning LGBTQ teachers from California schools.

The Florida bill is [one of more than 160](#) that potentially infringe on LGBTQ rights in US state legislatures this year, according to the LGBTQ rights group [Human Rights Campaign](#). These bills span a wide variety of topics, from banning trans girls from competing on girls' sports teams to banning trans women from using women's restrooms.

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Blinken Meets 'Abraham Accords' Partners in Negev as Israel Authorizes Five New Settlements There

In the June 2021 deal that forged Israel's ruling coalition government, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid agreed to a nine-month freeze on settlement construction in the Negev Desert to win the support of the Joint Arab List.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met on Monday with foreign ministers from four Arab states that have normalized relations with Israel - Morocco, Egypt, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates - in Israel's southern Negev desert.

"Just a few years ago this gathering would have been impossible to imagine. The United States has and will continue to strongly support a process that is transforming the region and beyond," Blinken said at the Negev summit.

An Israeli diplomatic [official told journalists](#) that Israel had discussed with its Arab partners "advancing a regional security architecture," focusing on threats by "air, sea, and piracy."

In the wake of Israel's lightning victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, when it seized the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza, Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula, the Arab League members met in Khartoum to forswear the ["Three Nos" regarding Israel](#): no recognition, no peace, no

negotiation. Aside from the above-mentioned states, plus Sudan and Jordan, no Arab power has diplomatic relations with Israel.

While Egypt negotiated a peace deal with Israel in the 1970s that culminated in the 1978 Camp David Accords, the other three states did so in 2020 as part of what then-US President Donald Trump called the Abraham Accords. Sudan also normalized relations in 2020, although with a [military junta in power](#) since October, Sudan has seen Jerusalem distance itself from Khartoum on the public stage.

The Abraham Accords were also supposed to forestall Israel's planned annexation of part of the Jordan River Valley in the West Bank, which is desired by many Zionist leaders but opposed by Palestinians, and which would violate United Nations [Security Council resolutions](#) deeming the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and its annexations of East Jerusalem and the Golan to be illegal.

A day prior, Blinken [met with senior Israeli leaders](#) before going to Ramallah to meet with Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian National Authority, a government that exercises authority over parts of the West Bank as a consequence of the 1994-5 Oslo Accords. It was envisaged that this government would become the nucleus of a future Palestinian state, but negotiations with Israel stalled long ago, and the perpetual march of Jewish settlers into the West Bank has only further complicated the situation.

"The current events in Europe have shown blatant double standards," Abbas told Blinken on Sunday. "Despite the crimes of the Israeli occupation that amounted to ethnic cleansing and racial discrimination... we find no one who is holding Israel responsible for behaving as a state above the law."

Jordan's King Abdullah II also visited Abbas in the West Bank but declined to go to the Negev summit. However, he did [meet with Lapid earlier](#) this month in an attempt to ensure there would be no provocations at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque by Jewish settlers during Ramadan, which begins on Friday. Last year, violence in East Jerusalem, including the storming of Al-Aqsa by Israeli settlers and police, helped [set off an 11-day war](#) between Israel and Gaza that killed 254 Palestinians and 13 Israelis.

Also on Sunday, the Israeli cabinet [approved the construction](#) of four new Jewish settlements in the eastern Negev near the Dead Sea: one kibbutz and three villages. A fifth settlement was also approved for Bedouin Arabs who live in the region. As part of the [deal to form a coalition government](#) last June, Lapid agreed to a nine-month settlement freeze in the Negev to win the support of the Joint Arab List, or Ra'am - the only Arab party in the Knesset to ever join an Israeli government. That moratorium expired earlier this month.

However, the expansion of Israeli settlements in the Negev is strongly opposed by the roughly 300,000 Bedouins, [who are often evicted](#) from their towns and farms. [Protests swept the region](#) in January after the Jewish National Fund proposed forestry expansion onto Bedouin farms near the village of Sawa on Tu BiShevat, which functions as Israel's Arbor Day.

"Our goal is to return the state to the Negev – Zionism 2022," Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, a right-wing figure who supports annexation of the West Bank, [said on Sunday](#). "This is neither ex territoria, nor is it the Wild West but a place in which the State of Israel is present – in both governance and resources."

Blinken is set to travel to North Africa, including Algeria and Morocco, later this week.

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IRGC Chief Says 'Eternal Fear' Keeps Iran's Enemies From Attacking Islamic Republic

Earlier this month, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) launched a missile attack against what they called "Israeli strategic centers" in the Iraqi city of Erbil, reportedly in revenge for an attack on a drone facility in the Iranian city of Kermanshah by the Israeli Mossad weeks prior.

Speaking to reporters in the southwestern city of Khorramshahr on Monday, Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami, commander of the IRGC, said Iran had not been attacked by its enemies owing to their "eternal fear" of an Iranian response.

"Today, the Islamic Republic of Iran's pillar of power is firm and strong, and Iran is shining in the world," he said, according to [Tasnim News Agency](#).

His words came amid a [visit to the region](#) by the Rahian-e Noor ("passengers of light"), who make a pilgrimage to historic battlefields around the time of Nowruz, or the Iranian new year. Much of the Iran-Iraq War was fought in the [surrounding Khuzestan province](#), which Iraq invaded in 1980 in an attempt to seize the oil-rich region with a large ethnic Arab population. However, the invasion didn't go as planned and more than 1 million people were killed on both sides by the time the United Nations brokered a ceasefire eight years later.

Earlier this month, the IRGC [launched a dozen missiles](#) at the Iraqi city of Erbil, capital of the northern Kurdistan region, claiming to be targeting a Mossad facility there, [reportedly in retaliation](#) for a suicide drone strike against an Iranian drone facility in Kermanshah in February. Israel has denied having a facility there and Kurdistan government officials said the missiles fell in residential areas.

Afterward, Salami said that any future attacks against Iran would be met with an immediate response.

"Be aware that we will not only take part in the funeral of our martyrs, but also immediately take their revenge. This is a real and serious message. If your mischief is repeated, you will once again experience our attacks and suffer the bitter taste of our missile blows," [Salami said at the time](#).

"In recent weeks you have seen how Zionists are always wrong in their calculations and have been targeted by Revolutionary Guard missiles. We are warning them that they should cease their mischief or we will bury them alive," Salami added.

While negotiations to restart the 2015 nuclear deal are [within a hair's breadth](#) of completion in Vienna, the Israeli government has never supported the deal and has carried out its own [espionage campaign](#) in Iran against the country's nuclear program. That has included sabotage operations and political assassinations like the broad-daylight killing of [Mohsen Fakhrizadeh](#), a top Iranian nuclear scientist, in November 2020.

The deal would see US sanctions against Iran dropped in exchange for Iran accepting strict limitations on the quality and quantity of uranium it can refine, sufficient to limit them to operating a handful of low-enrichment uranium-fueled nuclear power plants. The deal is supposed to curtail Iran's ability to develop a nuclear weapon, but Tehran says its nuclear program is

peaceful and that the country has forsworn all weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons.

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Gunfire Reported at Cancun International Airport

Gunfire was reported at Cancun International Airport in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula on Monday. A video posted on social media showed travelers scrambling out of Airport Terminal 3 on Monday, where gunfire and explosions were reported. Authorities declared a Code Red and summoned law enforcement and medical officials, [according to Mexican news](#) reports. According to the Quintana Roo secretary of public security, [Lucio Hernandez Guterrez](#), there have been no reports of injuries or of cartridges or explosion damage to support the claims of gunfire.

The shooting has come during one of the airport's busiest seasons, as travelers flock to the resort area for Spring Break vacations. However, [according to local officials](#), the level of traffic is still far below what was typical before the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020.

The incident also comes months after [two people were killed](#) in a fire at Cancun's Hyatt Ziva Riveria resort. The people killed were suspected to have ties to drug trafficking gangs. In June 2021, two were also [killed on Playa Tortugas](#) by gunmen who fled the scene on jet skis.

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Susan Collins Becomes First Republican Senator to Confirm Jackson to US Supreme Court

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Sen. Susan Collins announced on Wednesday that she will vote to confirm the nomination of Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson for the US Supreme Court, thus providing the first Republican vote to ensure that President Joe Biden's historic nominee will be confirmed.

The 117th Senate consists of 48 Democrats, two independents (both caucus with the Democrats) and 50 Republicans. Independent Sen. Bernie Sanders has expressed support for Jackson. In addition, Vice President Kamala Harris will be able to cast the decisive vote in the event of a tie.

"After reviewing Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson's extensive record, watching much of her hearing testimony, and meeting with her twice in person, I have concluded that she possesses the experience, qualifications, and integrity to serve as an Associate Justice on the Supreme Court," Collins said. "I will, therefore, vote to confirm her in this position."

President Biden nominated Jackson to the US Supreme Court in February, fulfilling his promise to nominate the first black woman to the bench.

Last week, Senate Minority Leader McConnell said he cannot support Jackson's nomination. Republicans and others have criticized Jackson for being an activist rather than interpreting the Constitution, and for allegedly being lenient in sentencing those charged with the sexual abuse of minors.

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Gulf States Seek Defense Deal With US After Houthi Attacks - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - A number of Persian Gulf monarchies are seeking a defense deal with the United States against the backdrop of increased attacks by the Houthi rebels on Emirati and Saudi infrastructure, Bloomberg reported on Wednesday, citing sources in the know.

The Arab countries - in particular the UAE and Saudi Arabia - would ideally like to sign a formal treaty with the US, sources said, but are open to considering bilateral agreements that could be expanded and revised later. Gulf states are considering a UAE deal with France, under which the latter deployed Rafale fighter jets to help protect Emirati airspace in February following Houthi attacks, to be a possible model for an agreement with the US.

Earlier on Tuesday, the command of the Saudi-led Arab coalition announced the suspension of military operations in Yemen. The step is intended to promote inter-Yemeni talks and create a positive atmosphere during the holy month of Ramadan to establish peace and ensure security and stability in Yemen, it said.

The conflict between the Yemeni government forces and the Houthis has been going on since 2014. The situation was further aggravated in 2015 after a coalition led by Saudi Arabia joined the conflict on the Yemeni government's side and began conducting air, land and sea operations against the Islamist rebel movement. The Houthis often retaliate by firing projectiles and drones at Saudi and UAE oil facilities.

Earlier this month, the Houthis intensified their attacks after Saudi Arabia executed 81 people, including three Yemeni prisoners of war.

During a meeting with the Abu Dhabi crown prince on Tuesday, Secretary of State Antony Blinken reaffirmed US commitment to "helping the UAE defend itself against threats stemming from Yemen and elsewhere in the region," the State Department said.

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RPT - US to Continue Causing Russia Problems Even if Peace Deal Reached With Kiev - Ex-Official

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to cause Moscow problems even if the Biden administration allows Ukraine to sign a peace deal with Russia, former US Assistant Treasury Secretary Paul Craig Roberts told Sputnik.

After three hours of deliberations in Istanbul on Tuesday, Russian and Ukrainian negotiators emerged to report progress in the talks to resolve the conflict in Ukraine. According to officials on both sides, Kiev promised not to join NATO while Moscow agreed not to oppose Ukraine entering the EU, among other terms.

Kiev also proposed security guarantees for Ukraine with the UN Security Council members acting as guarantors - along with Turkey, Germany, Canada, Italy, Poland, and Israel. In addition, the Russian delegation said a meeting between President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is possible after the parties agree to a deal.

"It is unclear that Washington will allow its puppet Zelenskyy to sign the agreement, or keep it if it is signed," Roberts said. "Washington will continue to cause problems for Russia."

Roberts said it is also unclear how Ukraine can be in the EU and remain neutral considering Austria, which is in a similar situation, agreed to impose sanctions on Russia.

Moscow, he added, must deal decisively with the Ukraine issue now and leave no room for its reappearance.

"Russia should sign no agreement unless it contains Ukraine's acceptance that Crimea and Donbas are not part of Ukraine," Roberts said.

The former US official also said Russia should consider if Ukraine can be trusted to keep this agreement when Kiev refused to abide the terms of the Minsk accords. Besides, he added, Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said many times it was a mistake to trust the West.

"There were guarantors of the Minsk agreement, and they did nothing," Roberts said. "So why repeat the mistake again?"

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US Preparing for Possible Spike in Apprehensions at Southern Border - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is preparing for a possible spike in apprehensions of illegal migrants on the US southern border, CBS News reported citing Homeland Security Department (DHS) officials.

The report said on Tuesday that the Biden administration is constructing additional migrant holding facilities, granting contracts for transportation services and deploying more immigration agents to the southern border to prepare for a possible influx of illegal migrants coming to the US-Mexico border.

The report said an unprecedented spike in illegal entries could happen as soon as Title 42 is lifted, which is a covid-related health policy that allows US immigration enforcement to immediately return asylum-seeking migrants back to Mexico.

DHS has contingency plans to respond to the possible daily arrival of 12,000 to 18,000 illegal migrants at the US southern border should the Title 42 policy be terminated, the report said.

Media reported that US immigration enforcement officers have encountered about a million illegal migrants at the southern border over the last six months, which is on pace to beat the all-time record of 1.7 million illegal migrants apprehended on the southern border in 2021.

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World Bank Approves \$400Mln in Financing to Help Tunisians Cope With Pandemic - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The World Bank approved \$400 million in more financing for Tunisia that will help nearly one million low-income households deal with the impact of the covid pandemic, the bank said in a statement.

"The World Bank today approved US\$400 million in additional financing for the Tunisia COVID-19 Social Protection Emergency Response Support Project which aims to help about 900,000 vulnerable Tunisian households, or 30% of the total population, to cope with the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis," the release said on Tuesday.

This additional financing, the release added, will continue to provide cash transfers to poor and low-income households while boosting Tunisia's social protection system.

The World Bank Group has deployed over \$157 billion to fight the pandemic in 100 countries, the release said and is making \$20 billion available until the end of 2022.

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US 'Strongly' Condemns Terrorist Attack in Israel That Killed Five People - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The United States strongly condemns the most recent terrorist attack that took place in Israel that killed five people, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said.

"We strongly condemn today's terrorist attack in Bnei Brak, Israel, that killed five innocent victims," Blinken said in a statement on Tuesday. "This comes after two other recent horrific terrorist attacks in Hadera and Be'er Sheva, Israel. This violence is unacceptable."

On late Tuesday, a gunman on a motorcycle opened fire in Bnei Brak, Israel, and was eventually killed by police, according to media reports.

The gunman was identified as a 27-year-old Palestinian man from the northern West Bank town of Yabad, media reported.

On Sunday, two gunman with the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia) killed two Israeli police officers in the city of Hadera. Last week, four people died in Be'er Sheva after an individual rammed his car into people and stabbed several others.

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Blinken Thanks Abu Dhabi Crown Prince for UAE Facilitating Ceasefire in Yemen - State Dept
(Adds background, fixes typo in headline)

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken during a meeting with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince welcomed the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) support in helping facilitate a ceasefire in Yemen, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met today with the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, in Rabat, Morocco," Price said in a press release on Tuesday. "The Secretary underscored that we remain committed to helping the UAE defend itself against threats stemming from Yemen and elsewhere in the region. He welcomed the UAE's support for a truce leading to a ceasefire in Yemen and reiterated that the only path to a durable peace is through dialogue and diplomacy."

Earlier on Tuesday, the command of the Saudi-led Arab coalition announced the suspension of military operations in Yemen. According to the military coalition statement, the suspension of military operations is the time for the "success of inter-Yemeni talks", as well as "creating a positive atmosphere during the holy month of Ramadan to establish peace and ensure security and stability in Yemen."

The conflict between the Yemeni government forces and the Houthis has continued for over six years. The situation was further aggravated after the military coalition led by Saudi Arabia joined the conflict on the Yemeni government's side in 2015 and began conducting occasional air, land and sea operations against the Islamist rebel movement. The Houthis often retaliate by firing projectiles and bomber drones at facilities in Saudi territory.

The coalition has been criticized by the UN and human rights groups for the bombings that have lead to civilian deaths including in attacks conducted using weaponry supplied by the US, France and the UK.

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US Indicts Ex-Ecuador Comptroller General for Involvement Money Laundering - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Former Ecuador Comptroller General Carlos Ramon Polit Faggioni appeared in a Miami court on charges of being involved in a plan to launder money in the United States to promote and conceal an illegal bribery scheme in Ecuador, the US Justice Department said in a press release.

"Between approximately 2010 and 2016, Polit allegedly solicited and received over \$10 million in bribe payments from Odebrecht S.A., the Brazil-based construction conglomerate, in exchange for using his official position as Comptroller General of Ecuador to influence official actions by the Comptroller's Office in order to benefit Odebrecht and its business in Ecuador," the release said on Tuesday.

Polit is alleged to have received a bribe from an Ecuadorian businessman in or around 2015 in exchange for assisting the businessman and his company in connection with certain contracts from the state-owned insurance company of Ecuador, the release said.

In December 2016, Odebrecht S.A. pled guilty in the Eastern District of New York to conspiring to violate the anti-bribery provisions of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act in connection with a broader plan to pay almost \$800 million in bribes to public officials in 12 countries, including Ecuador.

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Kiev also proposed security guarantees for Ukraine with the UN Security Council members acting as guarantors - along with Turkey, Germany, Canada, Italy, Poland, and Israel. In

addition, the Russian delegation said a meeting between President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is possible after the parties agree to a deal.

"It is unclear that Washington will allow its puppet Zelenskyy to sign the agreement, or keep it if it is signed," Roberts said. "Washington will continue to cause problems for Russia."

Roberts said it is also unclear how Ukraine can be in the EU and remain neutral considering Austria, which is in a similar situation, agreed to impose sanctions on Russia.

Moscow, he added, must deal decisively with the Ukraine issue now and leave no room for its reappearance.

"Russia should sign no agreement unless it contains Ukraine's acceptance that Crimea and Donbas are not part of Ukraine," Roberts said.

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Trudeau Warns of 'Difficult Time,' Food Shortages Due to COVID-19

TORONTO, March 29 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is warning of impending tough times, including food shortages, placing blame on the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

"We've seen... disruptions of supply chains around the world, which is resulting in higher prices for consumers and democracies, like ours, and resulting in significant shortages and projected shortages of food, of energy in places around the world. This is going to be a difficult time because of the war, because of the recovery from the pandemic," Trudeau told reporters in Vancouver on Thursday.

Earlier this month, Canada's state statistics agency announced that the country's economy fell well short of anticipated growth rates and not enough to overturn the coronavirus pandemic-induced contraction in 2020. Furthermore, the country remains gripped by an inflationary crisis, with the inflation rate rising to 5.7 percent in February, marking the highest increase since August of 1991.

The prime minister vowed to "have peoples' backs" and said that Canadians would "be there" for one another but stopped short of announcing any concrete measures to address the situation.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has previously dismissed similar accusations from US President Joe Biden, saying that Russia's campaign to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine has nothing to do with rising soaring prices in the United States.

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Canada Defense Chief Briefs Austin on F-35 Purchase, NORAD Modernization - Statement

TORONTO, March 29 (Sputnik) - Canada's defense chief Anita Anand briefed by telephone US counterpart Lloyd Austin on Ottawa's F-35 fighter jet purchase and progress on NORAD modernization, the Department of National Defense (DND) said.

Ottawa announced on Monday that it picked US defense contractor Lockheed Martin as a preferred bidder to supply 88 new F-35 fighter jets to replace Canada's aging fleet.

"Minister Anand updated Secretary Austin on Canada's Future Fighter Capability Project, and in particular, the Government of Canada's decision to enter the finalization phase of the procurement process with Lockheed Martin and the United States government for 88 new F-35 fighter aircraft," DND said in a statement on Tuesday.

Anand told Austin that the order, reported to cost Canada between \$11.2 billion and \$14.2 billion, is the most "significant investment in the Royal Canadian Air Force in more than 30 years" and boosts the country's ability to contribute to NATO and NORAD.

Canada's defense minister in the call reaffirmed Ottawa's commitment to NORAD modernization and condemned Russia's ongoing special military operation in Ukraine.

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Russia One of Top Two Cyber Adversaries US Currently Faces - FBI Assistant Director

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Russia is one of the top two cyber adversaries the United States currently faces in the world and is a "formidable foe," FBI Assistant Director for Cyber Bryan Vorndran told a hearing of the US House Judiciary Committee.

"Russia is one of the two most capable cyber adversaries we face globally: They are a formidable foe," Vorndran said on Tuesday. "The threat from Russia in the criminal sense and the nation sense is very real - and current."

When asked by a congressman whether Russia could win a war directly through cyber attacks that paralyzed US defense and other capabilities, Vorndran avoided giving any direct answer to the question.

"Can Russia win a war with cyber attacks? That's a really hard question for me to answer," Vorndran said.

State-sponsored hacking from Russia posed a "current" threat to US national security, he added.

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FBI Cyber Boss's Claimed Ignorance on Hunter Biden Laptop 'Astonishing' - Congressman

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - FBI Assistant Director for Cyber Bryan Vorndran's claim of ignorance about the location of Hunter Biden's laptop was "astonishing," US Congressman Matt Gaetz said at a hearing of the House Judiciary Committee.

"[Vorndran said he did not] have any information about the Hunter Biden laptop" even though the FBI had seized it from a repair shop in Delaware, the state his father President Joe Biden represented in the US Senate for 30 years, in December 2019. "I don't know where Hunter Biden's laptop is," Gaetz said on Tuesday. Hunter Biden has had extensive non-transparent business dealings in Ukraine.

Gaetz however refused to accept Vorndran's claim of ignorance and pressed the issue on him. "That is astonishing, you can't locate a laptop that was given to you three years ago: That is shocking. ...That is astonishing to me. You are the Assistant Director of FBI Cyber. I want to know where Hunter Biden's laptop is."

Vorndran claimed it was not in the realm of his responsibilities to answer Gaetz's questions. But the congressman replied, "I would think you would know this one." Hunter Biden's laptop might contain details of his business details with Ukraine and the Chinese, raising the risk it could fall into Russian hands and compromise him, the congressman said.

"So, will you commit to give us a briefing as the assistant director of FBI cyber as to where the laptop is, whether or not it's a point of vulnerability, whether or not the American people should wonder whether or not the first family is compromised?" Gaetz asked.

However, committee chairman Congressman Jerrold Nadler, a leader in the effort to topple President Donald Trump by accusing him of collusion with Russia, effectively shut down Gaetz's efforts to press the issue, US media reported earlier in the day.

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Ukraine Envoy to UN Says Istanbul Talks Show Russia May Be Ready to Move Forward to Peace

UNITED NATIONS, March 30 (Sputnik) - The new round of negotiations between Russia and Ukraine in Istanbul are showing that Moscow may be ready to move forward in the peace negotiations, Ukraine's Ambassador to the United Nations Sergiy Kyslytsya said.

"Today's negotiations in Istanbul have demonstrated that Russia may be ready to make steps forward," Kyslytsya told a UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine on Tuesday.

The ambassador acknowledged, however, that is still a long way to a sustainable ceasefire and comprehensive de-escalation, when the parties will continue negotiations to prepare and agree on provisions on a treaty.

Kyslytsya emphasized the importance of a mechanism of ceasefire implementation, troops withdrawal and the opening and safe functioning of humanitarian corridors.

Earlier in the day, Russia and Ukraine concluded another round of peace talks in Istanbul, Turkey, and Moscow announced that it will scale down its military activities in the Kiev and Chernihiv regions.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only and the civilian population is not in danger.

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Senior US Official to Consult With Indian Counterparts on Ukraine This Week - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 30 (Sputnik) - US Deputy National Security Advisor Daleep Singh will meet with his Indian counterparts in New Delhi this week to discuss matters concerning Ukraine and trade, the White House said.

"On March 30 and 31, Deputy National Security Advisor for International Economics Daleep Singh will be in New Delhi to continue our ongoing consultations with the Government of India, and advance a range of issues in the US-India economic relationship and strategic partnership," the White House said in a press release on Tuesday.

Singh and Indian government officials will discuss Ukraine, the Indo-Pacific economic framework and promoting freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region, the release said.

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Hackers Steal About \$625Mln in Cryptocurrency From Blockchain Firm Ronin - Statement
(Updates with more details, background in paras 4-8)

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Hackers have stolen about \$625 million in cryptocurrency from the Blockchain games platform Ronin that uses the Ethereum cryptocurrency, the company said in a statement.

"There has been a security breach on the Ronin Network," Ronin said in a statement on Tuesday. "Earlier today, we discovered that on March 23rd, Sky Mavis's Ronin validator nodes and Axie DAO validator nodes were compromised resulting in 173,600 Ethereum and 25.5M USDC drained from the Ronin bridge in two transactions."

The combined transactions, when converted to dollars, amount to \$625 million.

Ronin supports the popular video game Axie Infinity.

Axie Infinity co-founder Jeff Zirlin discussed the hack on stage during a keynote address at the NFT LA conference on Tuesday. NFT stands for non-fungible tokens, representing crypto assets that are unique, versus "fungible" assets like Bitcoin and dollar bills, which are the same in appearance and value for each piece.

"It is one of the bigger hacks in history," Zirlin told the conference.

Last year, an anonymous hacker stole roughly \$600 million in cryptocurrency from Poly Network, a decentralized finance network, in what was called the largest crypto heist in history. The hacker later gave it back.

It is not known at present whether Ronin will have a similar opportunity of recovering what it has lost.

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US Announces \$152Mln in Humanitarian Aid for Myanmar Refugees - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The United States has announced \$152 million in humanitarian aid for those persons who fled Myanmar following a military coup there, including the Rohingya in Bangladesh, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"US Ambassador to Bangladesh Peter Haas announced more than \$152 million in additional humanitarian assistance for those in Bangladesh, Burma, and elsewhere in the region affected by the Burmese military's genocide, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing against Rohingya," Price said in a statement on Tuesday.

The majority of the assistance or \$125 million, will be spent to provide life-saving assistance to 920,000 of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, the statement said.

In February 2021, The Myanmar military seized power using a constitutional mechanism of transferring power in an emergency situation. The military arrested government officials, accusing them of rigging the general election and later appointed a new administration. The military's actions spurred major civil unrest, which since the coup has resulted in over 1,600 casualties, with over 12,000 people arrested and 500,000 people internally displaced.

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US Stocks Up 4th Day in Row on Russia-Ukraine Peace Talks, Economic Optimism

NEW YORK, March 29 (Sputnik) - US stocks rose broadly for a fourth session in a row on Tuesday as Russia and Ukraine made progress in peace talks while oil prices and Treasury yields fell again, allaying investor concerns over inflation despite the Federal Reserve keeping to its tough language on rate hikes.

Wall Street's three stock indexes - the S&P 500, the Dow Jones Industrial Average and the Nasdaq Composite - closed up 1.4% on the average. Nasdaq, which houses the biggest technology names of the world, including Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, rose almost 2% on its own to lead gains.

The US ten-year Treasury note, which serves as an indicator of "real interest rates," fell for a third day in a row, declining 3.1% on Tuesday and a total of 4% since Thursday's close.

Oil prices fell 2%, extending Monday's 7% tumble as the US crude benchmark briefly traded beneath the \$100-per-barrel support amid twists and turns in Russia-Ukraine peace negotiations. Russia's top negotiator Vladimir Medinsky called the talks "constructive" and said a Moscow-Kiev summit was possible as soon as a peace agreement was ready. Medinsky also said Russia does not oppose Ukraine joining the European Union. In addition, he said Ukraine promised to refrain from joining military alliances.

On the US economic front, job openings hovered near record highs in February as vacancies continued to outpace hires in an unemployment market that remained overwhelmingly in favor of workers, the government's monthly Job Openings And Labor Turnover Summary report showed.

US consumer confidence, meanwhile, rose for the first time this year in March despite inflation and economic fallout likely from the war in Ukraine remaining high on Americans' worry list, The Conference Board said. Consumer spending accounts for about 70% of US annual growth. Despite such encouraging data, Philadelphia Federal Reserve President Patrick Harker warned that inflation was "running too high" and economic growth would likely be capped at 2.5% over the next two years.

US inflation, measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), grew 7.0% in 2021, and 7.9% during the year to February - both at their fastest in four decades. The CPI's expansion outpaces GDP, or gross domestic product, growth at 5.7% last year and projected by the Fed at 2.8% this year.

Federal Reserve policy-makers like Harker have a mere tolerance of 2% for inflation in a year. They have vowed to bring inflation back to their target with a series of rate hikes through 2023. The central bank approved its first pandemic-era rate hike on March 16, raising rates by 25 basis points, or a quarter percentage point. Harker, commenting on the central bank's forthcoming action, said he "wouldn't rule out a 50-basis-point rate hike at the next meeting" of the central bank in May.

In Tuesday's trading on Wall Street, the S&P 500, which groups the top 500 US stocks, closed up 58 points, or 1.3%, at 4,633.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which lists travel, aviation and cross-industry value stocks, rose 338 points, or almost 1%, to settle at 35,372.

The Nasdaq Composite finished up 265 points, or 1.8%, at 14,620.

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Biden Signs Into Law Legislation Making Lynching Federal Hate Crime

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden signed into law legislation that makes lynching in the United States a federal hate crime.

"I just signed into law the 'Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act,' making lynching a federal hate crime," Biden said during a press conference on Tuesday.

Biden said racial hate is not an old problem in the United States, but it is a persistent problem.

Media reported that some 4,743 people were lynched in the United States from 1882 to 1968, a majority of them African Americans.

The bill is named after Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African American who was killed in 1955 by a group of White men in the state of Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a White woman.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- * US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday "we will see" what Russia will do in commenting on the country's stated decision to dramatically decrease military operations in the Ukraine's Kiev and Chernihiv regions.
- * The United States is preparing to send former Afghan national army soldiers to the war zone in Ukraine, an informed source told Sputnik.
- * The claims that Ukrainian refugees are forcibly removed to Russia are a lie, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said,
- * he United States has seen a small number of Russian troops begin to move away from Kiev, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said.

RUSSIA-UKRAINE NEGOTIATIONS

- * The Russian Defense Ministry has decided to significantly decrease military activity in Kiev and Chernihiv regions of Ukraine, Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin said on Tuesday.
- * The United Nations is closely following the peace talks between Russia and Ukraine and hopes to see the reached commitments translated into actions on the ground, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.
- * Russia does not want to put Kiev at great military risk, Vladimir Medinsky, the head of Russia's delegation at talks in Istanbul, said on Tuesday, adding that the decision to decrease military activity in several regions does not mean a ceasefire.
- * The face-to-face format of talks between Russia and Ukraine in Turkey is over, consultations will continue in a video format, a source in the Russian delegation told Sputnik.
- * Ukraine's proposals on a system of security guarantees suggest that Kiev abandons its plans to return Crimea by military means, Medinsky said.
- * Kiev has promises to refrain from joining military alliances, Medinsky said.

PUTIN-MACRON TALKS

- * French President Emmanuel Macron said in a phone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin that it was impossible to pay for Russian gas contracts in rubles, Reuters reported citing the Elysee Palace.
- * Putin and Macron discussed the situation in Ukraine, taking into account the round of talks between representatives of Russia and Ukraine that ended in Istanbul, the Kremlin said.

* The Elysee Palace stated following a phone conversation between Macron and Putin that a humanitarian operation in Mariupol was impossible "at this stage," AFP reported.

DIPLOMATIC DISPUTES

* The expulsion of Russian diplomats from Belgium is a targeted blow to the very foundations of diplomatic relations with Russia and will not go unanswered, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Tuesday.

* Zakharova called the decision of the Dutch authorities to expel 17 Russian diplomats arbitrariness and said that Moscow would announce retaliatory measures.

* The Czech Foreign Ministry said it had informed the Russian Embassy in Prague about recognizing one diplomat persona non grata.

* The Irish Foreign Ministry summoned the Russian ambassador and informed him of Dublin's decision to expel four diplomats, Foreign Minister Simon Coveney said..

ENERGY MARKETS

* Any immediate replacement of Russian coal by Poland with another source is unlikely, the transition will be extended in time, the Russian Energy Ministry said on Tuesday.

* Poland plans to ban imports of coal from Russia, government spokesman Piotr Muller said.

* Western companies need to understand the changing situation in the context of the economic war against Russia, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said when discussing Moscow's requirement on ruble payments for gas.

NAGORNO-KARABAKH

* Moscow is calling against making any emotional statements regarding the self-proclaimed republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Tuesday, adding that Russia makes efforts to normalize the situation.

* The United Nations concerned about the tensions in and around Nagorno-Karabakh and urges all sides to de-escalate the situation and respect the previously established ceasefire and agreed upon commitments, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

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Harris, Singapore Counterpart Discuss Ukraine, Sanctions on Russia - White House

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong discussed joint efforts to implement sanctions on Russia and the support for the people of Ukraine, the White House said on Tuesday.

"Vice President Kamala Harris today met with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore," the White House said in a press release. "The Vice President thanked the Prime Minister for Singapore's support for Ukraine and the rules-based international order, including imposing financial sanctions and export controls on Russia. They discussed next steps in terms of

implementation of these economic measures as well as the importance of support for the people of Ukraine.

Harris has underscored the US continued commitment to the Indo-Pacific region and especially Southeast Asia region in terms of promoting free and open regional partnership, the release said.

Earlier on Tuesday, US President Joe Biden said that the conflict in Ukraine has a negative impact on the Indo-Pacific region.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only and the civilian population is not in danger.

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US State Dept. Approves Possible \$368Mln Sale of Tomahawk Missiles to UK - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The US State Department approved a potential \$368 million sale of Tomahawk missiles to the United Kingdom, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency said on Tuesday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of the United Kingdom of Tomahawk Weapon System (TWS) follow-on support and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$368.53 million," the agency said in a press release.

The proposed sale is meant to bolster the United States' national security by improving the security of a close NATO ally, the release said.

The main contractor of the proposed sale will be Raytheon, the release added.

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Russia Concerned About Use of Official UN, DHL Vehicles by Ukrainian Forces - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, March 29 (Sputnik) - Russia is concerned about the use of vehicles belonging to international organizations by Ukrainian forces for military purposes such as to transport weapons, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vasily Nebenzia said on Tuesday during a Security Council session on Ukraine.

"We also express our concern over ongoing cases of vehicles with UN insignia being confiscated by Ukrainian armed forces... We're aware of cases of radicals using OSCE vehicles as well," Nebenzia said. "Publications online clearly show that DHL delivery vehicles have also fallen into the hands of the Ukrainian army and are being used to transport weapons."

Nebenzia said Russia cannot rule out that the vehicles of these organizations or vehicles with medical markings "are being used to transport the very weapons that the West so generously promised to Kiev from neighboring states into Ukraine."

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FBI Assistant Director Warns Russia Planning Cyber Attacks on Critical US Sectors

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Russia plans to strike critical US sectors with cyber attacks and some software companies have already been targeted over the past two weeks, FBI Assistant Director for Cyber Bryan Vorndran told a hearing of the US House Judiciary Committee on Tuesday.

"We have absolute strategic warning that Russia plans to hit us," Vorndran said. "The threat from Russia in the criminal sense and the nation sense is very real - and current. ... We have software companies that have been targeted over the past couple of weeks. There are compromises against some of those 16 critical infrastructure sectors."

Vorndran's comments came 11 days after the FBI released a bulletin on March 18 saying it had identified Russian-linked scanning activity targeting at least five US energy companies and 18 other US businesses ranging from information technology to financial services.

"Instances of Russian scanning [in the energy sector] have increased," he said.

Preliminary scanning of intended cyber targets is an extremely important part of the attack cycles comparable to preliminary reconnaissance before a bank robbery, Vorndran added.

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Russia Poses No Threat to Civilian Navigation, Humanitarian Corridor Set Up - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, March 29 (Sputnik) - Russian forces do not pose any threat to the freedom of civilian navigation in the waters around Ukraine and Moscow has set up a humanitarian corridor for vessels to move through, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia said on Tuesday.

"The Russian armed forces are posing no threat to the freedom of civilian navigation. In order to allow foreign vessels to leave Ukrainian ports for open sea, we have set up a humanitarian corridor which is 80 nautical miles long with a three-mile traffic lane. The corridor is operational daily from 8:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. Moscow time. This information has been communicated by us to all interested parties," Nebenzia told a UN Security Council session on Ukraine.

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Russia Concerned About Ukraine Targeting 'Undesirable' Public Opinion Leaders - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, March 29 (Sputnik) - Russia is concerned about the Ukrainian government targeting so-called undesirable public opinion leaders amid the ongoing Russian special operation in the country, Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia said on Tuesday. "We have serious concerns regarding the measures being taken by Kiev to physically eliminate undesirable public opinion leaders," Nebenzia told a UN Security Council session on Ukraine. Nebenzia listed a number of figures, including scientists, journalists, historians and others, who have allegedly been targeted by the Ukrainian authorities and said Russia awaits a fair assessment of this witch hunt by Western colleagues and human rights organizations.

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EU to Be Fully Independent From Russian Gas by 2027 - Envoy to US

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The European Union will achieve being fully independent from Russian gas by 2027, the EU Ambassador to the United States Stavros Lambrinidis said on Tuesday.

"I believe that by 2027-2028, we will have reduced our consumption of gas by about 150 billion cubic meters. That is today the amount of gas that we importing from Russia," Lambrinidis said in an online conversation with the Washington Post.

Lambrinidis acknowledged that now the EU is importing from Russia about 40 percent of its gas consumption, and it is impossible to find a substitute for such a big amount overnight.

"What we are already focused on is by the end of the year to try to wind ourselves away by close to two-thirds of that dependency," he said.

Lambrinidis pointed out that working together with Washington is a big part of that agenda, and EU plans to increase gas supplies from the United States beginning next year. He also mentioned the importance of developing the energy sector based on renewable sources, which would change the entire economy in the region.

Last week, Russian President Vladimir Putin instructed the government and the national energy giant Gazprom to switch gas sales with countries that have imposed sanctions on Russia to rubles by the end of March.

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World Facing Food Shortages, Not Just Pricing Issues - WFP Chief

UNITED NATIONS, March 29 (Sputnik) - The availability of food has become a problem alongside surging prices, David Beasley, executive director for the UN World Food Programme, said on Tuesday.

"We're not just looking at pricing problems, but also possibly availability problems of food," Beasley told a UN Security Council meeting.

While speaking of the humanitarian situation in Ukraine, Beasley urged against ignoring humanitarian crises in other parts of the world.

"We are starting to cut rations for millions of children and their families across the world," he said, adding that the crisis in Ukraine is "the catastrophe on top of the catastrophe."

Beasley estimated that humanitarian workers will reach 2.5 million people in dire need of food in Ukraine over the next couple of weeks and by the end of June this number will total 6 million.

"We can't neglect Africa, Middle East though, or else there'll be migration on all sides of Europe," he said.

On Monday, the International Organization for Migration said that almost four million people, including 200,000 third-country nationals, have left Ukraine during Russia's military operation in the country.

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NASA Not to Set Artemis 1 Launch Date Until Wet Dress Rehearsal Results In - Officials

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - NASA officials will not decide on the launch date for the unmanned Artemis 1 system on the Space Launch System (SLS) rocket until at least next Monday, after the system completes its "wet dress" rehearsal check, NASA Deputy Associate Administrator for Exploration System Development Tom Whitmeyer said on Tuesday.

"We will be in a good position on Monday to talk about it [a possible launch date for Artemis 1 in June or July]," Whitmeyer told an audiocast press conference. "[There will be] no hard call until after the wet dress rehearsal."

The wet dress rehearsal of the entire SLS-Orion integrated Artemis 1 system will start at 5:00 p.m. EDT on Friday afternoon and should be completed by 5 pm EDT on Sunday when drain-off of liquid hydrogen and liquid oxygen propellant fuels will commence, NASA Artemis Launch Director Charlie Blackwell-Thompson said.

"A two-day test will be completed ... on Sunday afternoon. We expect by 4:30 pm -5:00 pm in the afternoon getting ready for drain offs," Blackwell-Thompson said. We want to get our Orion configuration powered up: It is a [test] of the entire launch configuration."

The rehearsal will include a simulated countdown on early Sunday afternoon to within 10 seconds of liftoff, Blackwell-Thompson added.

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Pentagon Says 10 F-18 Fighter Jets, 200 Troops Redeployed to Lithuania

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) – The United States has redeployed 10 F-18 fighter jets and at least 200 troops to Lithuania after completing an exercise in Norway, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"You've all been tracking a Marine Corps exercise Cold Response up in Norway. I can tell you that a command-and-control unit from marine air control group 28, which is based at Cherry Point has now been repositioned to Lithuania. That's about 200 people. So, they finished the exercise. They're in Lithuania now and about 10 Marine Corps F-18 Hornets from Beaufort, South Carolina and a couple of Marine Corps C-130s are now going to be repositioned to Eastern Europe," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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US Transport Safety Agency Says Experts Heading to China for Boeing Crash Probe

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) – A team of US investigators and technical advisors are heading to China this week to help determine the cause of last week's crash of a China Eastern flight that left 132 passengers and crew members dead, the US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) said Tuesday.

"China has issued visas to NTSB investigators and technical advisors from the FAA, Boeing and CFM to travel to China to support the CAAC's China Eastern B-737 accident investigation," the agency wrote on Twitter. "The team hopes to depart this week."

The NTSB said its team "will not release any information about the investigation as that authority belongs to the Chinese government under ICAO Annex 13."

The China-bound team includes the NTSB investigators and technical experts from Boeing, the Federal Aviation Administration and a team from engine manufacturer CFM International. The delay in leaving had to do with adhering to China's rigorous constraints because of new outbreaks of a COVID-19 variant.

Flight MU5735, with 132 people aboard, was enroute from the southwestern city of Kunming to Guangzhou on March 21 when it plunged from cruising altitude and crashed.

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Oil Prices Hit 2-Week Lows, US Crude Breaks Below \$100 Support

NEW YORK, March 29 (Sputnik) - Oil prices fell for a second straight day and to near two-week lows, with US crude briefly trading below the \$100 a barrel support on Tuesday amid varying interpretations on Russia-Ukraine peace talks that negatively impacted the sentiment in energy markets.

London-traded Brent, the global benchmark for oil, settled down \$2.25, or 2%, at \$110.23 per barrel. It fell to as low as \$102.25 during the session.

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate, or WTI, which serves as the benchmark for US crude, settled down \$1.72, or 1.6%, at \$103.24. WTI fell below \$100 earlier in the session, hitting a near two-week low of \$98.58 earlier.

The slide followed Monday's 7% drop in both crude benchmarks and reinforced the sheer volatility that has become the new normal for oil these days as longs in the market seek to buy the dip and profit big-time when the market rebounds.

Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podoliak told CNN peace talks with Russia in Turkey have been "successful enough" for a possible meeting between President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin.

Russia's top negotiator in the Ukraine crisis Vladimir Medinsky called the talks "constructive" and said a Putin-Zelenskyy meeting is possible as soon as the peace agreement is prepared. Medinsky also said Moscow does not oppose Ukraine joining the EU. In addition, he said Kiev promised to refrain from joining military alliances.

However, Medinsky told RT de-escalation around the Ukraine capital Kiev did not mean a ceasefire was in progress.

Few market participants also expect prices to remain depressed beyond Thursday, when OPEC+ holds its monthly meeting. The 23-nation strong oil producing coalition seems determined to keep prices at or above \$100 a barrel and has not budged in adding a single barrel beyond the monthly increments of 400,000 barrels per day in production it has allowed since last year.

"Longer-term pressures remain and OPEC+ looks unlikely to do anything to alleviate those this week," said Craig Erlam, analyst at online trading platform OANDA.

While OPEC+ has repeatedly stated its desire to remain "apolitical" and base its decisions purely on achieving a "balanced market", Erlam said the reality suggested otherwise.

"Given how unbalanced the market is and the fact that at the center of the alliance is the country to blame for the most recent surge in oil prices, it's hard to view a decision to not increase output targets as anything but political."

Aside from the Russia-Ukraine narrative, traders were on the lookout on Tuesday for US weekly oil inventory data, due after market settlement from the American Petroleum Institute, or API. The API will release at approximately 4:30 PM ET (20:30 GMT) a snapshot of closing balances on US crude, gasoline and distillates for the week ended March 25. The numbers serve as a precursor to official inventory data on the same due from the US Energy Information Administration on Wednesday.

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White House Says Weighing 'Plenty of Options' on Russia Sanctions

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) – The United States is considering a range of options to impose further costs on Russia in connection with the Ukraine crisis, White House Director of Communications Kate Bedingfield said on Tuesday.

"We will continue to intensify and we're not going to run out of options anytime soon ... There are plenty of things that we can do, including broadening sanctions to new targets, deepening the severity of sanctions that are existing. So, I don't have any specifics to announce at this time, except to say that there are certainly other options should we decide to move forward with them," Bedingfield told a press conference.

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Trudeau Says Canada's Federal Police to Conduct Own Probe of Alleged Russian War Crimes

TORONTO, March 29 (Sputnik) – Canada's federal police will conduct an investigation under domestic legislation into allegations of war crimes committed by Russia during its special military operation in Ukraine, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Monday.

Earlier in the day, Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino announced that Ottawa would make a "significant contribution" to the International Criminal Court's (ICC) ongoing investigations, including the investigation into the conflict in Ukraine.

"The [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] will ... undertake their own investigation under Canada's War Crimes Program," Trudeau told a news conference in Vancouver.

Last month, ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan announced his decision to open an investigation into possible war crimes in Ukraine. Later, Khan said that an advance team of ICC experts had departed for the country.

Russia began a special operation to demilitarize and "denazify" Ukraine last month, responding to calls for help from the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics in countering the aggression of Ukrainian troops.

Moscow has vociferously rejected claims that Russian troops have violated conventions regulating armed conflict, while Donbas residents have accused the ICC and other international bodies of ignoring Ukrainian aggression against the breakaway Russian-speaking region over the past eight years.

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US, Singapore to Deepen Cooperation, Boost Strategic Dialogue - Leaders' Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong during their meeting at the White House on Tuesday confirmed a shared commitment to deepen bilateral relations and improve strategic dialogue between their countries.

"Taken together, the opportunities and challenges of the 21st century demand deeper cooperation between us," Biden and Lee said in a joint statement.

The leaders stressed the importance of improving strategic partnerships in different areas. They noted that 5,400 US companies are working in Singapore now, and both countries have close people-to-people ties.

"As we strengthen our partnership, we will promote a world in which all nations, large and small, can stand together as equals to tackle the most pressing challenges of our era and deliver for our people," the statement read.

Both leaders reaffirmed their strong support for ASEAN and its role in the Indo-Pacific region. They also welcomed the enhanced engagement of European and regional partners in the area. Biden and Lee called on North Korea to engage in serious and sustained diplomacy. They also highlighted the importance of full implementation of relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions.

"The leaders underscore the importance of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region and encourage the peaceful resolution of disputes," the statement added.

Biden and Lee also expressed their concerns over the situations in Ukraine and Myanmar, and emphasized a joint commitment to confront terrorism in the region and around the world. They underscored the necessity to promote broad-based economic growth in their countries, and reaffirmed the close collaboration between the United States and Singapore on developing an Indo-Pacific economic framework with regional partners.

This agenda will allow to expand cooperation on trade, supply chains, clean energy, decarbonization, infrastructure, tax, and anti-corruption, they added.

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Schumer Joins Calls on Justice Thomas to Recuse From All Capitol Riot Cases

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Veteran Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas should recuse himself from all cases related to the January 6, 2021 riot that breached the US Capitol, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer told reporters on Tuesday

"The information that we have now raises questions about how close Justice Thomas was to the insurrection: I think he should recuse himself," Schumer told a Capitol Hill press conference.

"There's enough evidence already that he should recuse himself."

Schumer was speaking after US media reported texts from Thomas's wife, Virginia calling on then-President Donald Trump's chief of staff Mark Meadows to try to overturn current President Joe Biden's victory in the November 2020 national election.

These reports have raised "[a] serious question about how close Justice Thomas and his wife were to the planning and execution of the January 6 insurrection," Schumer said.

Early on Tuesday, 24 Democrats in Congress led by Sen. Elizabeth Warren and Rep. Pramila Jayapal demanded that Thomas, who has sat on the Court for 35 years, recuse himself from future cases related to efforts to challenge the results of the 2020 presidential election.

The 24 Democrats also called upon Chief Justice John Roberts to new binding and enforceable Code of Ethics for the Supreme Court. Schumer added that he was also in favor of

implementing such a code. When asked if he believed there should be a Code of Ethics for Supreme Court Justices, the senator replied, "Yes, I do."

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Pentagon Says Has Seen Small Number of Russian Troops Begin to Move Away From Kiev

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The United States has seen a small number of Russian troops begin to move away from Kiev, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said on Tuesday. "We've only seen very small numbers of troops actually begin to move away from Kiev," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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Pentagon Says Too Early to Judge What Additional Actions Russia May Take in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said on Tuesday that it is too early to judge what additional military action Russia may take in Ukraine. "It's too early to judge what additional actions the Kremlin may take," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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US Believes Russia Repositioning in Ukraine, Not Carrying Out Real Withdrawal - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The United States believes Russian forces are repositioning to other areas in Ukraine and not conducting a real withdrawal, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said on Tuesday. "We believe that this is a repositioning, not a real withdrawal, and that we all should be prepared to watch for a major offensive against other areas of Ukraine," Kirby said during a press briefing. **This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.**

New Bill Seeks to Strip US Intel Officials of Clearance for Doubting Biden Son Laptop Saga

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US Rep. Matt Gaetz is introducing legislation to end the security clearance of intelligence officials who signed a public letter decrying content taken from

a laptop belonging to Hunter Biden as Russian disinformation, the lawmaker's office said on Tuesday.

"Today, U.S. Congressman Matt Gaetz (FL-01) will introduce the 'Spook Who Cried Wolf Resolution,' a House Resolution to indefinitely bar security clearances for 51 intelligence officials who publicly signed a letter decrying the contents of Hunter Biden's laptop as Russian disinformation," Gaetz's office said in a press release.

The intelligence officials in October 2020 signed a letter expressing suspicions that emails recovered from a laptop belonging to Hunter Biden were part of a Russian information operation. Signatories of the letter included former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and former CIA Directors Mike Hayden, Leon Panetta and John Brennan.

Hunter Biden told a prostitute that he had a laptop stolen by Russians while he was close to overdosing on narcotics in a Las Vegas hotel in 2018, adding that he was worried it could be used to blackmail him, according to video acquired by the Daily Mail.

Hunter Biden also abandoned a laptop at a Delaware computer repair shop in 2019 while his father Joe Biden was running for US president, the contents of which were later made public. The emails were confirmed as legitimate by The New York Times in March 2022. Four of the 51 signatories maintain their support for the letter, the press release said.

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California Lawmakers Urge Biden Admin. to Let National Guard Support Ukraine - Letter

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US lawmakers representing California on Tuesday sent a letter to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, urging them to allow the state National Guard to engage in military and humanitarian support efforts for Ukraine.

"While we have the utmost confidence that the California National Guard is more than capable, willing and able to do more, without the federal government taking key steps to activate the required authorities, they will be unable to expand their efforts. We urge you expediently take the following steps to provide the California National Guard, the Ohio National Guard and those of other states as requested or appropriate, to expedite the process to transport both military and humanitarian support to the people of Ukraine," the letter said.

The lawmakers requested in the letter that the Biden administration immediately request the necessary approval to allow use of US military aircraft to transport equipment, medical supplies and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, both from government and private sources.

The lawmakers also urged Austin and Blinken to establish a point of contact to oversee airlift operations, which would include establishing a corridor to the region through a country such as Poland or Romania, the letter said.

Signatories of the letter include Representatives Adam Schiff, Sara Jacobs, Ted Lieu and Eric Swalwell among others.

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US Authorizes Second COVID-19 Booster for Older Americans - Federal Drug Agency

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The US government authorized a second booster of the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines for the elderly and the immunocompromised, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said on Tuesday.

"A second booster dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine or Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine may be administered to individuals 50 years of age and older at least 4 months after receipt of a first booster dose of any authorized or approved COVID-19 vaccine," the FDA said in a statement.

The current evidence, the release added, indicates there is some waning of protection over time against serious outcomes and the second booster dose of either the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna COVID-19 vaccine could help increase protection levels for higher-risk individuals.

The FDA previously authorized a single booster to all individuals aged 12 and over who completed the three-dose primary vaccination series.

The FDA "strongly" encouraged all adults to get the initial booster dose because it is critical to protect against severe outcomes.

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US Court Rejects Russian Businessman Deripaska's Bid to Lift Sanctions - Filing

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - A US appeals court rejected a bid by Russian businessman Oleg Deripaska to lift sanctions imposed on him in 2018, a court judgment revealed on Tuesday.

"For those reasons we affirm the district court's judgment," the document said.

The United States introduced sanctions against Deripaska and dozens of other Russian individuals and entities in April 2018 over their alleged links to the Russian government, which Washington has repeatedly accused of malign activities.

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Trump Leading Biden, Harris in Hypothetical 2024 Presidential Matchups - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump leads both incumbent Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris in hypothetical presidential campaign matchups for 2024, according to poll data reported by The Hill on Tuesday.

The Harvard CAPS-Harris poll places Trump ahead of Biden in a hypothetical matchup, with 47% and 41% respectively. Trump performed even better against Harris in the possible presidential race, leading her 49% to 38%, the poll found.

The poll results speak more to Biden's unpopularity than it does Trump's popularity, Harvard CAPS-Harris co-director Mark Penn said in the report. The poll placed Biden's overall current approval at 39%.

Trump still remains the frontrunner among potential Republican Party candidates for the 2024 election, with 59% of Republican voters expressing support for his run for a second term. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and former Vice President Mike Pence are in a tight race for second, with the former receiving 10% support and the latter getting 11%, according to the poll. The poll surveyed 1,990 registered American voters between March 23-24 and weighted to reflect known demographics, the report said.

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Rising Inflation Leading Worry for Over 60% of Americans in March - Poll

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Almost 55% of adult voters in the United States have pointed to inflation as being the most important or a major problem facing the United States and those the number exceeds 60% of those who say inflation is a leading cause of worry in March, a new Gallup Poll revealed on Tuesday.

"Inflation began rising as a public concern last fall, after being a nonissue for Americans throughout 2020. It registered no more than 2% of mentions in 2021 until October, when 5% cited it. But the percentage has increased more in the past month - seven percentage points to 17% - than in any month since the upward trend began," a release on the poll said.

Gallup explained that concerns significantly grew among Americans as inflation in the United States, including the rising gas prices and cost of living, continues to increase and is now at its highest point in 40 years with no signs of abating.

Inflation account for more than half of the economic issues that 35 percent of Americans cite it as a major problem, the release said. Within that group, 11% identify the economy in general as the chief problem and being on the wrong path, the release said.

Sixty-percent of Americans say they worry a great deal about inflation, a figure that leads most other issues, the release added.

The survey revealed most Americans expect the economic outlook to worsen, reflecting their growing concerns about inflation and broader pessimism about the economy over the past month.

Seventy-five percent of Americans now say conditions are getting worse, a five-point increase since February and an eight-point rise since January, the release said.

Americans' outlook for the economy is tied with the most negative outlook during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic in April 2020, according to the release.

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Biden Says 'We Will See' About Russia's Decision to Reduce Military Activities in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday "we will see" what Russia will do in commenting on the country's stated decision to dramatically decrease military operations in the Ukraine's Kiev and Chernihiv regions.

Earlier in the day, Russia and Ukraine concluded another round of peace talks in Istanbul, Turkey, and Moscow announced that it will scale down its military activities in the Kiev and Chernihiv regions.

"We'll see. I don't read anything into it until I see what their actions are. We'll see if they follow through with their suggestion," Biden said during a press briefing.

Biden noted that he had a meeting with the heads of state of three NATO allies - France, Germany and the United Kingdom - and said "there seems to be consensus that let's just see what they have to offer."

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UN Concerned Over Nagorno-Karabakh Tensions, Urges De-Escalation - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, March 29 (Sputnik) - The United Nations concerned about the the tensions in and around Nagorno-Karabakh and urges all sides to de-escalate the situation and respect the previously established ceasefire and agreed upon commitments, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday.

The Russian defense ministry said on Saturday that Azerbaijan's armed forces entered the zone of responsibility of the Russian peacekeeping contingent in the self-proclaimed republic of Nagorno-Karabakh and set up an observation post after inflicting four strikes on the local forces near the village of Farux.

"We remain concerned about the reports of continued tensions in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. We welcome efforts for de-escalation in the trilateral format and the engagement of the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs. All efforts must be made to ensure full respect for the ceasefire and full implementation of agreed commitments," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

The United Nations continues to urge the sides to refrain from any actions and statements that could escalate the situation, he added.

Dujarric also called on the the parties to resolve outstanding issues, including humanitarian oness, through direct dialogue within existing formats.

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Biden, European Allies Discussed Aid to Ukraine, Stabilizing Energy Markets - White House

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden discussed with the leaders of France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom continuing to provide security aid to Ukraine and stabilizing energy markets, the White House said on Tuesday.

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. spoke today with President Emmanuel Macron of France, Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany, Prime Minister Mario Draghi of Italy, and Prime Minister Boris Johnson of the United Kingdom," the White House said in a press release. "The leaders affirmed their determination...to continue supplying Ukraine with security assistance to defend itself...They reviewed their efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to the millions affected by the violence, both inside Ukraine and seeking refuge in other countries, and underscored the need for humanitarian access to civilians in Mariupol."

The leaders also discussed the importance of supporting stable energy markets in light of current disruptions caused by Western sanctions, the release said.

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Biden Says Looks Forward to Hosting ASEAN Leaders This Spring

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Tuesday said he looks forward to hosting leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) at the White House this spring.

"I'm looking forward to hosting the ASEAN leaders here in Washington, DC for a special summit this spring," Biden said during a press conference alongside the Singaporean prime minister.

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Conflict in Ukraine Has Negative Impact on Indo-Pacific Region - US-Singapore Statement

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has a negative impact in the Indo-Pacific region, which necessitates a deeper cooperation between the United States and Singapore, the leaders of the two countries said in a joint statement on Tuesday.

"The war in Ukraine has a negative impact on the Indo-Pacific region, which already faces many complex challenges. Taken together, the opportunities and challenges of the 21st century demand deeper cooperation between us," the statement said.

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UN Closely Follows Russia-Ukraine Talks, Says Important to Translate Pledges Into Actions

UNITED NATIONS, March 29 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is closely following the peace talks between Russia and Ukraine and hopes to see the reached commitments translated into actions on the ground, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday.

"We are obviously following what is going on in Turkey. We are following the statements and various reports that have been made, including the comments by the Russian Federation," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

Dujarric characterized as positive the comments made by Russian officials who said Moscow has decided to significantly reduce military activity in Ukraine's Kiev and Chernihiv regions.

"I think what is important for us, is that these pledges, these commitments be translated as quickly as possible into concrete agreements and concrete action on the ground that would enable us to help deliver humanitarian goods and hopefully also lead to cessation of fighting," Dujarric said.

Earlier on Tuesday, Istanbul hosted a new round of negotiations between Moscow and Kiev. The talks were held at the Dolmabahce palace and lasted about three hours.

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Hackers Steal About \$625Mln in Cryptocurrency From Blockchain Firm Ronin - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Hackers have stolen about \$625 million in cryptocurrency from Blockchain platform Ronin, the company said in a statement on Tuesday.

"There has been a security breach on the Ronin Network," Ronin, a platform that uses the Ethereum cryptocurrency, said in a statement. "Earlier today, we discovered that on March 23rd, Sky Mavis's Ronin validator nodes and Axie DAO validator nodes were compromised resulting in 173,600 Ethereum and 25.5M USDC drained from the Ronin bridge in two transactions." The combined transactions, when converted to dollars, amount to \$625 million.

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Biden Weighing Extra \$500Mln in Security, Humanitarian Aid for Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is considering providing Ukraine with an additional \$500 million in security and humanitarian assistance, Bloomberg reported on Tuesday.

The United States is pushing its European allies to provide Ukraine with the same amount of assistance as well, the report said.

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US Job Openings Hovering Near Record Highs in February - Labor Department

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US job openings hovered near record highs in February as vacancies continued to outpace hires in a labor market that remained overwhelmingly in favor of workers, the government's monthly Job Openings and Labor Turnover Summary (JOLTS) showed on Tuesday.

"The number of job openings was little changed at 11.3 million on the last business day of February," the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a unit within the Labor Department, said in its monthly update on the JOLTS numbers.

Job openings hit a record high of 11.4 million in December. The gap between hires and job openings had grown steadily for months, with positions filled rising by 263,000 to 6.7 million in February — versus the 11.3 million in openings.

Joblessness among Americans reached a record high of 14.8% in April 2020, with the loss of some 20 million jobs in the aftermath of the coronavirus breakout. Jobs recovery has, however, been stellar over the past year, with the jobless rate moving down to 3.8%. A jobless rate of 4% or below is regarded by the Fed as maximum employment.

Fed Chairman Jerome Powell said earlier this month that the labor market was "extremely tight" with robust demand and subdued supply. He also noted that more than a million positions were filled within the first two months of the year due to robust economic growth. The economy grew 5.7% in 2021, expanding at its fastest pace in four decades, after a 3.5% contraction in 2020 from coronavirus-related disruptions.

Aside from ramping job numbers, the United States is experiencing one of the greatest transformations of its employment market as COVID-19 measures upended labor supply and work trends, putting employees' demands above those of employers.

The JOLTS report came ahead of Friday's all-important US non-farm payrolls report for March from the Labor Department, which is expected to cite a jobs growth of 490,000 and an unemployment rate of 3.7%.

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US Trial Begins in Case of Alleged Islamic State 'Beatles' Murder Group Member - Court

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Jury selection began on Tuesday in the trial of a man accused of participating in an Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia) cell involved in the capture and murder of journalists and aid workers, according to a US federal district court schedule.

El Shafee Elsheikh is being tried in a Virginia federal district court on charges that he participated in the capture and murder of two journalists and two aid workers from the United States, although prosecutors said he was also allegedly involved in the deaths of victims from other countries.

Elsheikh, 33, was an alleged member of the four-man IS group labeled the "Beatles" by some due to their British accents, which appeared in execution videos sent around the world in response to unpaid ransom demands the group placed on captured individuals. The group is believed to have beheaded around two dozen hostages.

Elsheikh was captured alongside fellow alleged group member Alexandra Kotey by Kurdish forces in 2018 and later transferred into US custody. The leader of the group, Mohammed Emwazi, dubbed "Jihadi John," was killed in an airstrike in November 2015. The fourth member, Aine Lesley Davis, was convicted and sentenced in 2017 in Turkey to seven and a half years in prison.

Elsheikh would face a mandatory sentence of life in prison if convicted by the jury at trial.

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US Growth Seen Capped at 2.5% Next 2 Years as Inflation Runs 'Too High' - Fed Official

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US economic growth is expected to be capped at 2.5% over the next two years due to inflation, which is currently "running too high," Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia President Patrick Harker said on Tuesday.

"I think growth will moderate this year," Harker said. "We can probably expect to come in around 3 percent to 3.5 percent GDP growth this year - and then falling to trend [a] growth of 2 percent to 2.5 percent during the next couple of years."

Inflation, measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), grew 7% in 2021 and 7.9% during the year to February - both at their fastest in four decades. The CPI's expansion outpaces GDP, or gross domestic product, growth at 5.7% last year and projected by the Fed at 2.8% this year. Policy-makers at the US central bank like Harker have a mere tolerance of 2% for inflation per year and have vowed to bring inflation back to their target with a series of interest rate hikes through 2023.

"Inflation is running far too high, and I am acutely concerned about this," Harker said. "Russia's invasion of Ukraine will add to inflation pressure, not only hiking oil and gas prices but other commodities, like wheat and fertilizer, as well."

The Federal Reserve approved its first pandemic-era rate hike on March 16, raising rates by 25 basis points, or a quarter percentage point. Many of its policy-makers have said since that the March hike was too tame to fight inflation and that a more aggressive hike may be needed next as the central bank considers as many as seven rate adjustments this year.

Commenting on the forthcoming Federal Reserve action, Harker said he "wouldn't rule out a 50-basis-point rate hike at the next meeting" of the central bank in May, although he would not commit to that at this point.

"I expect a series of deliberate, methodical hikes as the year continues and the data evolve," Harker said. "I also anticipate that we will begin to reduce our holdings of Treasury securities, agency debt, and mortgage-backed securities soon."

Aside from keeping interest rates at almost zero for two years prior to its March rate hike, the Federal Reserve purchased \$120 billion worth of bonds and assets for each month during that

period to support the economy. Those asset purchases and others have added some \$4 trillion to the central bank's so-called balance sheet, which now stands at around \$8.5 trillion. Federal Reserve officials have said they hope to trim that figure significantly over the next two years.

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US Official Says Russia Launched Multiple Hypersonics at Military Targets in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Russia has launched hypersonic missiles multiple times against Ukrainian military targets during its ongoing special operation, US European Command chief Gen. Tod Wolters said on Tuesday.

On March 19, the Russian Defense Ministry said that it had deployed Kinzhal hypersonic missiles for the first time during the special military operation in Ukraine to strike a munitions depot in the Ivano-Frankivsk region.

"There have been multiple launches, most of them have been directed at military targets," Wolters, who is also NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, told a Senate hearing. "Most of those strikes have been designated at specific military targets."

On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine responding to calls for help from the Donbas republics in defending themselves against the aggression of Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only, but later accused Ukrainian forces of using typical terrorist methods, such as hiding behind civilians and positioning weapons systems in civilian areas.

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US Consumer Confidence Up First Time in 3 Months But Worries Still High - Conference Board
WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US consumer confidence rose for the first time this year in March while high inflation and economic fallout likely from the war in Ukraine remained high on Americans' worry list, the Conference Board said on Tuesday.

"Consumer confidence was up slightly in March after declines in February and January," Conference Board Senior Director of Economic Indicators Lynn Franco said. "Expectations (for the economy), on the other hand, weakened further with consumers citing rising prices, especially at the gas pump, and the war in Ukraine as factors. Meanwhile, purchasing intentions for big-ticket items like automobiles have softened somewhat over the past few months as expectations for interest rates have risen."

In a March 1-23 survey, The Conference Board put its Consumer Confidence Index at 107.2, up from 105.7 in February.

The bump-up in consumer confidence could bring a frisson of relief to policy-makers stung by the spectacular surge in inflation since last year.

US inflation, measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), grew 7.0% in 2021, and 7.9% during the year to February - both at their fastest in four decades. The CPI's expansion outpaces economic growth at 5.7% last year and projected at 2.8% this year.

Policy-makers at the Federal Reserve have a mere tolerance of 2% for inflation in a year. They have vowed to bring inflation back to their target with a series of rate hikes through 2023.

"Consumer confidence continues to be supported by strong employment growth and thus has been holding up remarkably well despite geopolitical uncertainties and expectations for inflation over the next 12 months reaching 7.9% - an all-time high," Franco said. "However, these (geopolitical and inflation) headwinds are expected to persist in the short term and may potentially dampen confidence as well as cool spending further in the months ahead."

On Friday, the University of Michigan said in its own Consumer Sentiment Survey that Americans appeared more worried about inflation now than during the worst two US recessions in the 1980s and in 2008.

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US Does Not Train Ukrainian Troops in Poland, Provides Advice Instead - EUCOM Commander

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The United States is not training Ukrainian forces in Poland but is advising Ukrainian liaisons amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, European Command (EUCOM) head Gen. Tod Wolters said in a congressional testimony on Tuesday.

"I do not believe that we are in the process of currently training military forces from Ukraine in Poland. There are liaisons that are there, they're being given advice, and that's different,"

Wolters told the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

On Monday, President Joe Biden attempted to clarify his recent remarks about deploying US forces to Ukraine and said what he meant was the defense Department was going to train Ukrainian troops that are currently in Poland.

Biden and his administration have repeatedly said the United States will not deploy US troops in Ukraine to fight Russia.

On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only and the civilian population is not in danger.

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No Details on 'Poisoning' of Abramovich, Ukraine Delegates, Issue Raises Concern - Blinken

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The United States has no details about the alleged poisoning of Russian businessman Roman Abramovich and Ukrainian peace negotiators, but the incident is one of concern, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

"As for the stories on the poisoning I don't have any details on that, I've seen the report. What I can say is that it raises concerns [because] Russia has a real track record," Blinken said at a press conference with Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita in Rabat.

On Monday, The Wall Street Journal reported, citing sources, that Abramovich and Ukrainian peace negotiators experienced symptoms of suspected poisoning after a meeting in Kiev on March 3.

On Tuesday, Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied the reports, dismissing them as a "part of the information war." He confirmed that Abramovich has been involved in establishing certain contacts between Moscow and Kiev, but not as an official member of the Russian delegation.

Abramovich was present at Russian-Ukrainian peace talks in Istanbul on Tuesday.

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US May Need to Deploy More Troops in Europe Amid Changing Security Environment - General

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The number of US troops in Europe will likely be increased in light of the changing security environment in the region after the conflict in Ukraine comes to an end, European Command (EUCOM) head Gen. Tod Wolters said during a congressional hearing on Tuesday.

"I would just tell you that based off of the dynamic environment that exists today, that number [of US troops in Europe] could change. I suspect that it probably will, and in which direction will be determined based off conditions in the environment," Wolters told the US Senate Armed Services Committee. "My suspicion is we're going to still need more."

Wolters underscored that the United States must to be ready to adjust to the new security conditions in Europe following the completion of Russia's special operation in Ukraine by altering the size of US contributions to the region.

The EUCOM commander added that the United States' presence in Europe has gone up from 60,000 to 100,000 troops as a result of the Russian special operation.

On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only and the civilian population is not in danger.

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White House Phone Logs Sent to US House January 6 Committee Have 7-Hour Gap - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Eleven pages of White House telephone logs that the National Archives turned over to the US House Select Committee investigating the January 6 riot at the US Capitol have a seven-hour gap with no record of the calls former President Donald Trump made and who received them, the Washington Post reported on Tuesday.

Internal White House records from January 6, 2021 that were turned over to the US House Select Committee show a gap in President Donald Trump's phone logs of seven hours and 37 minutes, the report said.

The Select Committee is now probing whether Trump used "burner" phones, communicated through back-channels or used aides' telephones, said two people with knowledge of the probe who spoke on the condition of anonymity. The panel is also trying to determine if it received the full logs reflecting all the calls placed and received on Jan 6.

Earlier this month, the Select Committee filed court papers presenting what they believe is evidence that Trump, attorney John Eastman and others could potentially be charged with criminal offenses, including obstructing an official proceeding of Congress and conspiracy to defraud the American people.

The Select Committee members have alleged there is enough evidence to conclude that Trump and his associates may have conspired to commit fraud and obstruction by misleading Americans about the outcome of the 2020 election and attempting to overturn the result.

Trump - and numerous Republicans - have said the work of the Select Committee is a political theater and a witch hunt conducted primarily by Democrats to prevent the former president and his allies to run for office. Conservatives have pointed out that the FBI's investigation into the January 6 events found no evidence of a conspiracy and also the Select Committee had refused to include lawmakers such as Congressman Jim Jordan that would be critical of its activities and narrative.

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Canada to Make 'Significant Contribution' to ICC Probes, Including in Ukraine - Minister

TORONTO, March 29 (Sputnik) – Canada plans to play an important role in the International Criminal Court's (ICC) ongoing investigations, including a probe into the conflict in Ukraine, Minister of Public Safety Marco Mendicino said on Tuesday.

"Today, I am announcing that Canada will be making a significant contribution to the International Criminal Court's (ICC) ongoing investigations, including the ongoing investigation into the situation in Ukraine, further to a request from the ICC's Office of the Prosecutor," Mendicino said in a statement.

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Biden Concludes Call on Ukraine With European Counterparts - White House

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden at 10:12 a.m. EDT (14:12 GMT) concluded his call with four European counterparts to discuss the ongoing Russian special operation in Ukraine, the White House said on Tuesday.

"President Biden's call with French President Macron, German Chancellor Scholz, Italian Prime Minister Draghi, and UK Prime Minister Johnson concluded at 10:12 EDT," the White House said in a pool report.

The leaders began their call almost an hour earlier at 9:19 a.m. EDT, according to a previous White House pool report.

Leaders from the US, NATO, EU and others have stepped up collaboration on sanctions and collective defense in recent weeks in response to the Russian special operation in Ukraine.

The operation, which began in late February, is intended to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine in defense of the Donbas republics, the Kremlin said. Negotiations between Russian and Ukrainian delegations are ongoing, with lead Russian negotiator Vladimir Medinsky calling Tuesday's talks in Istanbul "constructive."

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Deputy US Treasury Secretary Says Will Find, Hold Accountable Russia Sanctions Evaders

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - The United States will find and hold accountable individuals or entities that attempt to evade sanctions imposed on Russia for its special operation in Ukraine, Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo said on Tuesday.

"We're paying a lot of attention to sanctions evasion... What we want to make very clear to crypto exchanges, to financial institutions, to individuals, to anyone who may be in a position to help Russia take advantage and evade our sanctions: We will hold you accountable. We will come and we will find you," Adeyemo said during an interview with CNBC.

Cryptocurrencies and shell companies are possible means by which actors could attempt to bypass the sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States and its allies in response to Russia's special operation in Ukraine, Adeyemo said.

The United States has not yet seen Russia evade sanctions in a meaningful way, but they are attempting to do so, Adeyemo added.

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Google Announces \$35Mln in Ukraine Refugee Aid, \$10Mln to Fight Disinformation - CEO

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Google is donating \$35 million for aid to Ukrainian refugees and spending another \$10 million to set up a "Jigsaw initiative" to counter what it call "disinformation" about the conflict, company CEO Sundar Pichai announced on Tuesday. "Today, we announced several additional initiatives to help with these efforts, and to support the post-war recovery of Central and Eastern Europe," Pichai said in a statement. "To help the humanitarian aid efforts on the ground in Central and Eastern Europe, Google.org and Googlers have committed over \$35 million in funding and in-kind support."

Pichai said the measure includes support for organizations focused on people in Ukraine, like Nova Ukraine and Fight for Right, as well as nonprofits supporting refugees in bordering countries, such as the Polish Center for International Aid, Hungarian Interchurch Aid and People in Need in Slovakia.

"A big part of the challenge is addressing the misinformation that is spreading about the realities and facts of the war in Ukraine. Today we're investing an additional \$10 million for this effort, including new partnerships with think tanks and civil society organizations to conduct region-specific research into misinformation and disinformation, as well as cash grants to support fact-checking networks and nonprofits," Pichai said.

The new organization will be called Jigsaw and will function as a unit within Google that builds technology to counter threats to open societies, will partner with local experts and academics to develop approaches to both directly counter disinformation and help people more easily identify disinformation, Pichai added.

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Blinken Says US Focused on Russia's Deeds Rather Than Words

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday there is what Russia says and there is what Russia does, with the United States focusing on the latter. "There is what Russia says and there is what Russia does, we are focused on the latter," Blinken said at a press conference with Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita in Rabat.

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Trump Calls on Putin to Release Info on Hunter Biden's Ties to Ex-Moscow Mayor's Wife

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump on Tuesday called on Russian President Vladimir Putin to release information related dealings between current US President Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden, and the wife of the former mayor of Moscow. In 2020, a group of US Senate Republicans revealed that an investment firm co-founded by Hunter Biden received \$3.5 million from the wife of former Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, billionaire Elena Baturina, as part of a "consultancy agreement."

"Why did the Moscow Mayor's wife give [Joe and Hunter Biden] \$3.5 million... I would think Putin would know the answer to that, I think he should release it. I think we should know that answer," Trump said.

When previously asked about the issue, Putin refused to comment and denied any knowledge of ties between Baturina and the Biden family.

The White House has downplayed the allegations made by Senators and the report that digs into the Biden family's business endeavors in Ukraine and are now part of several investigations in the US.

White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said last week that she is unfamiliar with the report and questioned the evidence behind it. Biden, meanwhile, has repeatedly brushed off the accusations, claiming them to be a "Russian disinformation."

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Blinken Declines to Comment on Results of Russia-Ukraine Talks

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday declined to comment on the results of Russia-Ukraine peace talks and left it to Kiev to assess any progress.

"First on the talks. I would leave it to Ukrainian partners to characterize whether there is any genuine progress and whether Russia is engaging meaningfully," Blinken said while speaking at a press conference with Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita in Rabat.

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Johnson & Johnson Suspends Supply of Personal Care Products in Russia

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) – US health care company Johnson & Johnson said on Tuesday it is suspending the supply of personal care products in Russia.

"We have decided to suspend supply of our personal care products in Russia," the company said.

It also announced plans to double its donations to humanitarian assistance efforts in Ukraine from \$5 million to \$10 million.

In early March, Johnson & Johnson suspended all advertising, enrollment in clinical trials, and any additional investment in Russia in response to the situation in Ukraine.

On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help in defending themselves against Ukrainian provocations. In response to Russia's operation, Western countries have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow, which includes airspace closures and

restrictive measures targeting numerous Russian officials and entities, media, and financial institutions. Some foreign companies have suspended their Russian operations altogether.

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US Envoy Visiting Gulf States for Talks on Yemen – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 29 (Sputnik) – US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking is visiting Gulf states to discuss diplomatic efforts toward a durable and inclusive resolution of the Yemen conflict, the State Department said on Tuesday.

"Special Envoy Lenderking will prioritize his engagements in the region on mobilizing additional life-saving humanitarian assistance for Yemen," the statement read.

Although the US has provided an additional \$585 million to Yemen, the country's humanitarian response remains just 30% funded, it added.

In addition, the Middle Eastern nation is facing a lack of wheat supplies caused by the crisis in Ukraine. The latter has accounted for over 30% of Yemen's wheat imports, the statement noted. While in Saudi Arabia, Lenderking will participate in intra-Yemeni dialogue facilitated by the Gulf Cooperation Council.

"The United States welcomes opportunities for Yemenis to come together, to represent their diverse experiences and perspectives, and to identify solutions and reforms that can improve the lives of citizens," the statement said.

Yemen has been gripped by an internal conflict between the government forces and the Houthi movement. Since 2015, the Saudi-led coalition fighting on the Yemeni government's side has been conducting air, land and sea operations against the rebels. The Houthis often retaliate by firing projectiles and drones toward Saudi territory.